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SUBJECT: LRA Mediator: Justice Should be Universal

Ref: Khartoum 2038 and previous

**¶1.** (SBU) One of the leading mediators in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) talks believes this process is the only way to avoid real impunity. He said that for justice to truly be served, all sides, including the Ugandan Government, must be held accountable for its actions. Hizkias Assefa, Riek Machar's deputy in the mediation and the lead full-time, professional mediator, met with the Acting Consul General (A/CG) on August 28 and expressed largely the same views as the UN observer team (reftel). However, he also warned that other solutions, especially a military solution, would send a message that the Ugandan Government is free to commit human rights abuses in northern Uganda as long as it remains the strongest and can win the war. Assefa fears this would only encourage another group to follow the LRA, just as the LRA followed the rebellions before it. Impunity, he explained, must go both ways.

**¶2.** (SBU) The A/CG pointed out that one of the problems with using the LRA talks to address larger social issues is that it elevates the status of LRA leader Joseph Kony, a terrorist with no real political agenda, and it confuses the issues of the LRA with the problems in northern Uganda. Assefa said Kony cares about the social issues, but conceded that it is not Kony's primary concern. Kony does not really understand the problems, only that there is marginalization. Assefa said that the increased participation of civil society, religious leaders, and opposition parties as observers to the talks, now sanctioned by the Ugandan Government, should help bridge this gap. The A/CG cautioned that even with their participation, it will still be difficult to truly address the root causes of marginalization while the talks are being driven by an unsophisticated negotiating team speaking for a cult-like leader.

**¶3.** (SBU) Overall, Assefa said he was encouraged by the progress of the talks. In contrast to what he described as a negative portrayal in the media, he said the relationship between the two parties at the table was changing and both sides were showing increased flexibility. He said that at the beginning the LRA delegation would make demands and then threaten to walk out if the demands were not met. On the Ugandan side, they also began as very rigid, and the meetings were attended by Ugandan generals in full dress uniforms. These military men would leave their sunglasses on and sit silently at the back of the room giving stern and disapproving looks. Now, Assefa said, both sides show flexibility, and the generals come out of uniform and get engaged in the discussions. The two sides even occasionally joke together and make conversation. That said, Assefa went on to describe the talks as the most frustratingly unpredictable he had ever seen.

**¶4.** (U) Bio Date: Assefa is an Ethiopian who is on the faculty of Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, where he spends several months each year teaching intensive courses on conflict resolution. The rest of the year, he is based in Nairobi and works to mediate various conflicts in Africa. He has been involved in LRA mediation efforts for over a decade, in association with Pax Christi. Assefa was scheduled to travel to Nigeria in September to do some work in

the Niger Delta region, but has been put on hold while these talks continue.

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